

Politics as Property

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The social urge represented by the toppling of N T Rama Rao demands economic and industrial modernisation and development. And for that it demands efficient and quick-acting governance of the type that has made men like Pratap Singh Kairon and Sharad Pawar famous. It is here that NTR is perceived by a substantial segment of Andhra Pradesh's elite as having failed.

All political happenings are not significant events. Whether the toppling of N T Rama Rao in his ripe old age by a coterie directed by his own sons-in-law and abetted by his own sons is an event of any significance is a point that needs discussion. It can no doubt be said that it happened at a time when the man least deserved it — which is not saying much, for he has at every point of time abundantly deserved it — and for a reason that carries no great conviction with the people at large. His dear wife was said to have been an ‘*extra-constitutional* centre of authority’, which means little because all authority in the Indian polity is in any case *extra-constitutional*, even when it derives formal sanction from the Constitution. More to the point, the old man’s son Hari Krishna, who was a catalyst in the turbulence and has now become minister for transport in the son-in-law’s cabinet, is as much an *extra-constitutional* centre of authority as his much-maligned stepmother, inasmuch as he too has presumed to dictate the shape of political happenings in the state without ever having been elected to the assembly by or in the name of the people, an act of anointment that is evidently accepted by common consent as a good enough entitlement for toppling, subverting or hijacking governments.

A Hindu coparcenary being what it is, all property disputes among Hindu families carry an element of high drama. And castes such as the *Kammas* who are substantially propertied have a community culture in which this drama is an understood and well elaborated element. The early Telugu films, for instance, were in large measure nothing but the enactment of this familiar drama of peasant proprietor or landlord families on the screen, and NTR has acted in quite a few of them. In most such films the dramatic dénouement begins with the aging of the patriarch, and is not uncommonly

precipitated by his late infatuation with a young wife, a foster child or some such aberration that the heirs regard as senile delinquency. That by that time the patriarch, whatever his past acts of despotic authority, is usually a mellowed man, a silver haired specimen of contrition, or at least of a certain desire to make up with all and sundry — including the *naxalites*, in NTR's case — before quitting this world, generates a certain sneaking sympathy for him in the onlookers. And the heirs look even more villainous than they need to.

It was this drama of painful generational change in the property holdings of a Hindu joint family that Andhra Pradesh witnessed in the last couple of months. But what made it weird was that the property that the family was fighting over was the *State of Andhra Pradesh* — its people, politics and wealth. This itself, perhaps, is its significance, for Andhra Pradesh is a state that prides itself on its radical history; it can justly boast of a significant political element that is radically critical of the existing and inherited order of things. That radical critique can also fairly claim that it has influenced people's perceptions and ways of looking at things in major measure. And yet the inadequacy of this history is such that a single family — no doubt a rather big and glamorous one — can fight over the state as its joint property, the way such families have fought over home and hearth for centuries in the feudal-patriarchal tradition. And the people at large, including the more politically sensitive among them, are not only not outraged but find it quite amusing; or else, what is even worse, dismiss it as an irrelevant interlude in the grand progress of history.

But it is possible, perhaps, to seek other points of significance as well. Indeed, one can even 'rationalise' the events to reveal a hidden meaning, a rational order disguised by maverick accidents, an analytical practice that radical — especially much of Marxist — thinking has always been prone to. For instance, one may see in the rise and the crisis of the *Telugu Desam Party* the birth-pangs of a self-conscious regional *bourgeoisie*, its strategies of consolidation and their crises. Such rationalisation is one of the most fascinating things about radical critiques, and contributes a lot to their enduring attraction — notwithstanding repeated practical and predictive failures; but the fascination is in truth a distraction. Such a mode of analysis is faulty because what is filtered out in this process, and (to mix metaphors) thrown out like the peeled skin of a fruit is thereby surreptitiously rendered irrelevant and insignificant. It is usually not, a point that becomes unpleasantly evident when what is peeled off analytically to reveal the alleged rational core returns later — in real and not analytical time — to stick again to the fruit.

Let us try then to seek a significance of recent events in AP in as non-rationalising a way as possible. It is one thing to recognise order and causation where it exists, and to recognise human subjectivity in history; but quite another thing to seek the

working out of a neat pattern of *reason* acted out by social collectivities set up as historical subjects. All such thinking leads to overt or covert reification of history, which in turn leads to *utopian* prescriptions for putting an end to such history. And all *utopias* are anti-human, even the most humane of them. The human subject — both as an individual and as a collective — is too small to bear the heavy weight of *utopias*. It can only be crushed by them. A *non-utopian* radicalism requires a non-rationalising mode of analysis; a mode of seeking truth, for truth must necessarily be sought, that will accept reason but will reject *reason*, and will be adequately cautious in identifying patterns of orderliness and causation in history, keeping it always in mind that the history is *human*, and therefore always carries with it a large quantity of contingency, in every sense of that term — finiteness, disharmony, incongruence, accident, whimsicality and so on.

The birth of the *Telugu Desam Party* 13 years ago was the political consequence of at least two phenomena. One is the dissatisfaction felt by a certain section of Andhra's regional elite with the Congress Party's strategies in dealing with the aspirations for political power in the states and regions. Those sections of the regional landed-financial-commercial elite that possessed the advantage of substantial property, and cohesive homogeneity as well as a standing of social leadership within the caste system — such as the rich among the *Kammas* of coastal Andhra Pradesh — felt that they deserved more political power than the Congress was prepared to give them. The unwillingness of the Congress was due to many factors, which may not be susceptible to an ordering in terms of historical significance or decisiveness. One was the negative factor that the Congress Party, with its unitary vision of India, did not like strong and self-assertive elites to develop in the states, which in its language would lead to 'fissiparous tendencies'. There were, however, less negative reasons too. There was a felt need to accommodate the aspirations of backward regions and socially weak communities in the states by allowing their representatives — real or putative — to occupy positions of power. This meant that the most powerful regional elites would be to some extent sidelined, or at least forced to share power and glory with the less deserving. But this positive factor contained within it another negative factor, which has been emphasised by *Ambedkarite* analysts. This was that the Congress, especially at the level of national politics, was dominated by *brahmins*, whereas the upcoming regional rich were from *sudra* communities, which was one reason why the Congress expressed a preference for a unitary structure of the polity, and encouraged the less dynamic of the *sudra* communities, or those from backward and undeveloped regions within the states. This process was also congruent with the sociological fact that in the backward and undeveloped regions, the unity between the *brahmin* and *sudra* elites as the principal exploiting groups of pre-modern India has not been fully shattered,

whereas in the developed regions, that unity had been breached even by 1947, for both economic and political-cultural reasons. In Andhra Pradesh Congress politics, for instance, the *brahmin* leadership has had a more or less cosy relation with the *Reddy* landlords of Rayalaseema and Telangana, whereas in coastal Andhra the *Kamma* community's rise, in social and political terms, took place in an anti-*brahmin* ambience, represented explicitly by non-*brahmin* self-respect type of movements, and implicitly by the rationalist, atheist and communist movements. It was this *Kamma* community that developed a very able and talented middle class and a powerful entrepreneurial elite taking advantage of the positive material conditions prevalent in the region watered by the Krishna and Godavari rivers, which conditions became even better after the *green revolution*. And yet, the rise to political power of this elite commensurate with its tremendous dynamism was blocked by Congress strategies.

While the resentment against this denial was one powerful mood behind the formation of the *Telugu Desam Party*, there was another whose contours have become clearer now than they were at that time. Whatever may have been true in 1947, by the 1980s, all the states of India, considered as ethnic-linguistic regions, had developed an elite quite capable of taking charge of the affairs of the region. Today, there is little doubt that they can fully take command of their regions and rule them as ably as Delhi is able to rule India. A person like Chandra Babu Naidu, the latest chief minister of AP, is equal to anybody in Delhi, whether in running an efficient administration, amassing unlawful wealth or cutting his opponents' throats. He and his class do not need to be overseen by Delhi in doing their job. They have nothing left to learn — in administration, commerce or criminality — from Delhi. India is today certainly ripe for federalisation, for this if for no nobler reason. And if a morally desirable end is actually realised through not so noble pressures, then that would not be the first time it has happened in human history, nor is it going to be the last time.

This pressure of impatience felt by well grown regional elites has been expressed in political language in the idiom of *decentralisation*, *autonomy*, *federalism*, etc. If it is true that these expressions are not to be taken literally as the actual aspirations of all those who talk in terms of them, then it is also true that they are not to be understood as mere ideology, in the sense of either a distorted representation of reality or, worse still — a camouflage for hidden material interests. The notions are just what they are: the values in terms of which actual aspirations are conceived, thought of and explained, following the general principle that in human thought every particular idea or aspiration is conceived of and expressed in terms of universal values, in other words that the cognitive and the normative are inseparable in human thought, for human beings cannot make sense of their existence without making moral sense of it. Ideological camouflage is not ruled out here, but that is no more the essence of the

matter than the naive equation of values with actual aspirations. What is involved here is a structural property of human thought, which naturally operates in a social context.

Once such a universal value comes into existence it is capable of being taken up and given fresh content in other aspirations; of being attached to or reinterpreted in other contexts so as to give rise to new aspirations, and energise hitherto dormant political practices; of becoming part of social culture that shapes human potential into actual behaviour patterns; and thence also of realising itself in social institutions, social relations and social practices beyond the intentions and arms of those in whose aspirations it originally found normative expression. The notion of ideology — even when we grant that ‘it is capable of influencing material reality’ — is not sufficient to comprehend this important historical process. This is not to say that the notion is entirely useless, provided it is used within the limited space of its utility.

The emergence of self-sufficient elite with the slogan of *federation* is frequently interpreted in terms of the rise of *sub-nationalism* or *regional nationalism*. Whether the interpretation is valid in a given case depends upon the details of that case, and the underlying rationalisation that ethnic upsurge is some sort of a law of the contemporary third world, must be viewed with suspicion. As far as Andhra Pradesh is concerned, there has been no rise of ‘nationalist’ feeling parallel with the change that we have been describing, for there is in general no strong feeling of ‘Telugu-ness’ comparable with what one finds among the Tamils and the Bengalis (not to mention the Kashmiris).

But whether or not an emergent regional nationalism has coincided in all regions of the country with the rise of self-assertive elites, there is one other change which has taken place. This is an urge that goes beyond the ruling class of the region and well into the middle class, to create a fully-fledged modern community, a well-rounded civil and political society in the regions, by structuring the necessary institutions, conventions and norms. One may call this a process of the nation in the making, if there were a nation in the making. It cannot be assumed to be there, merely because this urge is there. But even without the self-conscious notion of a ‘nation’ (with all the implied desires of a distinct destiny and identity), there can be an emergent desire for a coherently structured modern society with functioning institutions and respectable norms of public life, which is both desirable in itself (and actually desired by many in the developing community) and a precondition for the legitimacy of the governance of the region’s elite. The unitary character of the Indian state, coupled with its gradual criminalisation has left much to be desired in this matter. A strong desire to set this right and to shape a full-fledged modern society in which every conscious member of the community may take pride, and over which the regional elite may legitimately rule, is a strongly felt idea that comes through very vocally in

the regional press, academic writings and literature. In Andhra Pradesh, its strongest and most self-conscious representative has been the daily newspaper *Eenadu*, which silently prided itself on having brought N T Rama Rao to power in the first instance for this very end, and which is now no longer even very silent in claiming credit for having forced his replacement by his son-in-law, again to the same end.

Eenadu has not merely reported, but has taken a political stand while reporting all major public issues concerning Andhra Pradesh in recent years. Here are two instances where its purpose coincided with larger democratic aspirations. The paper, over the last two years, has made it impossible for any government ruling the state to continue the familiar Indian liquor policy of making people drink more and more so that the government may 'balance its budget'. The paper has also done much to put the searchlight on warlord violence in the Rayalaseema districts, and create a reaction of disgust in the ordinary reader. The plaint of the warlord politicians of Rayalaseema that their region's profile has been deliberately maligned by a coastal Andhra Pradesh testifies to its success in creating revulsion.

Both these campaigns no doubt hurt the Congress, and can easily be interpreted as part of that paper's anti-Congress politics, as they frequently are. But going beyond that, both these campaigns have contributed to a certain cleansing of public life in the state, which made them attractive to the public at large, and contributed to the regional elite's aspiration for a self-respecting civil and political society for it to rule over. NTR was not slow in picking up the cue. He was not very consistent in the matter of the political violence of Rayalaseema, for that violence has always been loyal only to power and not to any party, and NTR was not above the temptation of co-opting it instead of vanquishing it. In any case, for politicians of the present generation, the Cuddapah and Kurnool 'model' of democracy through bombs and guns offers a tempting alternative to the tedious business of cajoling an increasingly cynical electorate. But on liquor, NTR did not hesitate beyond the first couple of weeks. He loudly set himself up as the saviour of the agitating women.

However, the social urge represented by *Eenadu*'s politics goes beyond this. It demands economic and industrial modernisation and development. And for that it demands efficient and quick acting governance of the type that has made men like Pratap Singh Kairon and Sharad Pawar famous. It has heard of the Bombay-Ahmedabad industrial corridor and the throbbing entrepreneurial life of Punjab. The no-nonsense administrative efficiency that would appeal to local, national and multinational capital, and encourage them to transform Andhra Pradesh in like image, is a much prized thing in this view, which has acquired greater force and self-confidence in the era of Manmohan Singh. This requires, among other things, a certain mood of purposeful governance, quick decision-making, and political balance. It is here that NTR is per-

ceived, by *Eenadu* and the substantial segment of AP's elite that is like-minded with it, as having failed. This dissatisfaction of theirs has been evident from the beginning of his political career. Like all people driven by purposeful rationality, these men were upset by the whimsicality of NTR who is on a perpetual honeymoon with his own godliness. But they put up with him until he went and got himself a wife to whose ambition he was willing to sacrifice even the stability of the party and government. The TDP has over the years struck a balance between the unquestioned charisma of its undisputed leader, and the organisational grip of the elder of his two politically active sons-in-law. Within the terms set by this balance the second rank leaders learnt to locate themselves, assess each other's standing and evaluate their respective chances of climbing up the ladder. This knowledge and the certainty that went with it made for whatever stability the TDP had, and it was this that was upset by Lakshmi Parvati — NTR's second wife. A woman as greedy, as intelligent, as able and as ambitious as Chandra Babu Naidu (and there was no third person in the party that could match either of them), she not only gave the son-in-law the jitters, but completely upset the structure of opportunities that everybody in the party understood and related themselves to, in her effort, as a late-coming aspirant for the successorship, to create a base for herself in the party. Naturally, the least valued men in the party gathered around her and entered the mansion of power 'through the kitchen' as Telugu papers contemptuously said. It is an interesting sidelight that she literally made the kitchen her headquarters. Indeed, the whole of Lakshmi Parvati's strategy has been built around symbols of wifeliness — the caring, cooking consort — which were meant to create acceptability for her politics by pretending to be what she was certainly not: a mere wife. But such is the unhappy lot of precocious individuals who wish — for good or for bad — to grow out of socially given roles without questioning the roles and the attendant expectations.

The expectations, reinforced by a particularly vicious press led by *Eenadu*, helped Chandra Babu Naidu and the jittery party men who had gathered under his umbrella, frightened by the sudden shaking of the familiar earth beneath their feet. 1995 has been a year of elections in Andhra Pradesh. After the assembly elections, the entire electoral process for the three-tier *panchayat raj*, the *municipalities* and the *co-operative societies* was gone through with. At each step, the TDP was shaken by conflicts over allotment of tickets, with Lakshmi Parvati patronising candidates of her choice, who were mainly men who would otherwise not have stood much chance of breaking through the established party network to get tickets for themselves. At the end, when all the elections were over, the party had come close to an irremediable division. It only required the coming together of the two discordant sons-in-law, blessed by a disloyal son — Hari Krishna, and as soon as that unity was cemented, the legislature party

split, and NTR was dethroned. He made an ass of himself by parking his favourite campaign van outside the hotel where the disloyal legislators were camping and inciting the policemen present — who had by that time guessed which way the wind blew — to drag the dissidents from out of the hotel and hand them over to his lawful custody, such being his notion of lawfulness. He later made a further ass of himself by demanding that the office of governor must be abolished — though Krishna Kant had followed the procedure quite scrupulously — and that chief ministers must hereafter be elected directly like the president of the US so that they may be undisturbed in their whimsicality for five full years.

Throughout this terminal combat, *Eenadu* played a determined role by lampooning Lakshmi Parvati's ambition, as if she was the first ambitious politician this state has seen. It made copious use of the patriarchal distrust of an ambitious woman who gets married to a wealthy and powerful old man whose brain is suspected to have gone soft of late. This is the acme of vampishness in a woman, and Lakshmi Parvati was guilty of this. Nothing more was needed for a determined campaigner to damn her.

The ruthless campaign is matched by the man it has brought to power. Chandra Babu Naidu is a cut-throat politician of current vintage. He is also ably suited for the role that *Eenadu* and the opinion it represents hope he will play. Like any man who was born in a four-acres-of-dry-land peasant family from backward Rayalaseema and has made for himself umpteen crores by the time he is 40. he is abundantly endowed with what capitalism calls *enterprise*. But going beyond making money for himself and his cronies, he claims the vision necessary to structure a modern capitalist society endowed with the characteristics required to reproduce itself as a matter of course. This, as we have said, is one vision that underlay the rise of the *Telugu Desam Party*. There is no inevitability of its success, and no ruse of *reason* that will work for its success. All that we can say is that for the present it has the national and international climate in its favour, apart from whatever internal dynamism it has. But then that climate itself contains much that may ultimately disfavour or distort it to suit a different purpose. And the internal dynamism operates in a specifically third world environment.

But Andhra politics has always provided space for other visions, other values that can inform the process of the formation of a modern society. These are values of equality, justice and welfare. Whether these values are realisable in the absolute sense or not, they can function as a counterpoint to the kind of vision that *Eenadu* and Chandra Babu Naidu desire, and can drastically modify the outcome of the ongoing process of social transformation. It would have helped if the proponents of the alternative values understood the radical social model they visualise as a counterpoint in ideals rather than the next phase of an ordered History. But then it is an aspect of unavoidable

human contingency that we have to put up with radical baggage of the past as much as with the conservative muck.